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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)  
SUBJECT: LIBERAL PARTY TO TEST ITS STRENGTH IN UPCOMING  
PRIMARY

REF: A. BOGOTA 2833  
[1](#)B. 08 BOGOTA 3699

Classified By: POL Counselor Mark Wells for Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Liberal Party insiders hope for a robust turnout in their September 27 primary to select local leaders and a presidential candidate in what they see as a test of strength. Cesar Gaviria, former president and head of the party, is publicly hammering away at the reelection referendum while the Liberal Party presidential candidates campaign positively but with little attention. The Liberal Party is exploring the possibility of holding an "opposition" primary next spring under new political rules to select a unified candidate. End Summary.

VOTER TURNOUT BIG TEST IN UPCOMING PRIMARY

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[1](#)2. (C) The center-left Liberal Party remains the largest and strongest individual party in Colombia and the only serious opposition to Uribe's governing coalition. The Liberals, though posting a strong showing in the 2007 local elections, view long-term trends in party support and affiliation with concern (see ref b). The Liberals see their primary to elect a presidential candidate and local party authorities on September 27 as an important test of party strength. Secretary General Jose Noe Rios told us that the Liberals hope for a "very good" turnout. He expects that the political machinery of over 53,000 local candidates in 87 percent of Colombia's municipalities will get voters to the ballot box. Alfonso Gomez Mendez, one of seven Liberal Party presidential candidates, has stated publicly that the Liberal Party would consider between 1.5 and 2 million voters a success.

CESAR GAVIRIA PLAYING BAD COP

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[1](#)3. (C) Since the Congress approved the reelection referendum (ref a), Cesar Gaviria, President of the Liberal Party, has been carrying the anti-reelection banner. Appearing almost daily in the media, former President Gaviria has fiercely criticized the reelection referendum, saying for example that Uribe is "moving quickly to become a dictator." Secretary General Noe told us that they continue to understand the high political costs of publicly opposing reelection and President Uribe. The party instructed its caucus to abstain in the final referendum vote rather than oppose it outright in order to preserve political capital. He added that the Liberal

Party presidential candidates would campaign positively and focus on issues. Some observers believe that Cesar Gaviria would declare himself a candidate if it became clear that Uribe would not run for a third term. For his part, Gaviria continues to publicly deny that he has any aspirations to run for a second term.

#### NO MEDIA LOVE FOR CANDIDATES

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14. (C) Gaviria said that he has been knocking on doors to get Liberal Party candidates media attention, something "not easy" in his words. Juanita Leon, a political observer and editor of [www.lasillavacia.com](http://www.lasillavacia.com), told us no one is paying attention because the story continues to be the reelection referendum. She added that although the referendum has thrown a wrench into the candidacies of Uribe allies (the Conservative Party is seeking to postpone their primary into next year after the possible referendum), the spotlight helps the coalition. A recent Invamer-Gallup poll also showed voters' lack of awareness of Liberal candidates --on average, 64 percent of respondents had neither a favorable or unfavorable opinion of each of the seven candidates. Rafael Pardo Rueda topped the seven Liberal candidates in the poll with a 29 percent favorable and 18 percent unfavorable rating.

#### SINGLE OPPOSITION CANDIDATE POSSIBLE

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15. (C) Noe told us the Liberal Party was exploring the possibility of holding an inter-party primary with

independents and other centrist opposition parties next spring to select a single "opposition" candidate. This is a new possibility in the Colombian political system thanks to reforms passed by Congress in June.  
Brownfield